THE UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

ANNOUNCING UFMCC AIDS CONFERENCE -- Jan. 18-20, 1991

OCTOBER, 1990
Editor: Rev. Dr. Stephen Pieters

Dear Friends,

I want to bring your attention to the upcoming UFMCC Annual Conference on HIV/AIDS, "Empowering Response to the Rainbow Epidemic". The Conference will focus on HIV among people of color, who are clearly disproportionately affected by this epidemic. The conference is being co-sponsored by UFMCC's Department of People of Color.

In addition to our emphasis on HIV/AIDS among people of color, workshops will be provided on other various needs and issues related to HIV/AIDS ministry among Lesbians and Gay men. A brochure will be available in late October for registration and further details.

The Conference will be held January 18-20, 1991, in Orlando, Florida, at the Radisson West Maingate, adjacent to Disney World. Travel and hotel arrangements can be made through Jim Voltz, at Vacation Corporation; (213) 933-4111 or (800) 966-7174. Registration will be $125 prior to December 18, 1990; $145 after that.

Featured speakers include Sallie Perryman, a Founding Director of the AIDS National Interfaith Network. HIV-positive herself, she relates the story of her husband's HIV-related death in the Academy Award winning film, "Common Threads." Her address to the Opening Session of the Sixth International Conference on AIDS in San Francisco was recently published in ALERT.

Rev. Elder Jeri Ann Harvey is scheduled to preach and lead one of her acclaimed healing services. She will also be leading a workshop on "Women and HIV/AIDS."

Also speaking will be Phillip Matthews, a member of MCC Dallas, and an Education Specialist at the AIDS Interfaith Network of Northern Texas. A number of UFMCC clergy and laity with HIV/AIDS will speak of their experiences on a panel.

Last year's conference in Houston was a tremendous success, according to those present at the Evaluation Session. Deeply moving worship experiences, inspiring keynote speakers, controversy, and a great chance to spend time with persons engaged in similar ministries; this kind of experience awaits you January 18-20 at the Third Annual UFMCC HIV/AIDS Conference.

Make plans to be there, NOW!

HOW COULD THEY DIE ON THE SAME DAY?

By Rev. Stephen Pieters

It was like Jefferson and Adams both dying on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Rev. Ron Russell-Coons and Rev. Emmett Watkins were diagnosed with AIDS about the same time, in 1986. They were the first two clergypersons in UFMCC diagnosed after me. They were both angry prophets. They both had to demand that we be the Body of Christ because their lives were at stake, and we were not responding the way they wanted. They were both oftentimes disappointed in us. They were both men of great faith, whose preaching, but above all, whose example inspired many people. And they both died on August 25, 1990, on opposite coasts.

Ron was a man who loved cows, and cats, and his children, and especially Chuck. His own experience in resigning his pulpit in Seattle forced the Fellowship to deal with our lack of disability policy. He began one of his sermons by giving the congregation permission to feel their feelings. When Ron expressed some of his feelings, it made many uncomfortable. I remember Ron's incredible coming out story, his comic side, and his relationship with Chuck.

Emmett had a strong personality any way you looked at him. I've heard many people in recent weeks recalling his teaching us all about racism, as a student clergy-person at the Clergy Conference outside Detroit. Emmett always commanded the floor. He never believed how much he was loved, until near the end of his life. He had gifts of healing which left many people resting in the spirit. He pastored a church right up to his death. When I preached there in June, his congregation was loving him fiercely. He loved them just as fiercely, and had built an incredibly strong community of faith in a place where MCC had always had difficulty building a church. When he was a student clergyperson, he always knew he would be a great pastor, and he was.

(Continued next page)

We have lost five of our clergy to AIDS this summer: Rev. Brad Anderson, Rev. Ron Bergeron, Rev. Jim Harris, Rev. Emmett Watkins, and Rev. Ron Russell-Coons. Rev. Ernie Edwards lost his lover Michael, to AIDS this summer. Joseph Johnson, one of the lay leaders of Good Shepherd Parish MCC, Chicago, also died from AIDS this summer. Rev. Larry Uhrig was diagnosed as HIV+ and started on AZT (see his article elsewhere in this issue.)

When Ron and Emmett died on the same day, it felt too overwhelming to take in. As I contemplate the heavy toll HIV is taking on UFMCC, I once again have to ask how my faith informs this experience. For me, faith gives me permission to grieve, with the knowledge that God is with us in our sorrow and our rage. Our faith calls us to insist on fullness of life in the face of all this death; it calls us to maintain hope, even in the midst of our grief; and it calls us to ever more loving service, as more of us face the outrage of HIV.

May everything we say and do in our AIDS ministries be living and loving memorials to the faith and the lives of all our loved ones who have been taken from our presence by HIV.

MEMORIAL FOR REV. RON RUSSELL-COONS

The Rev. Ron Russell-Coons, former pastor of MCC's in Baton Rouge, LA; Sarasota, FL; and Seattle, WA, died August 25 at his home in San Francisco from complications associated with AIDS. At the time of his death, he served on the staff of MCC San Francisco.

Before his affiliation with the UFMCC, he served as a minister in a Southern Baptist Church.

In a letter to UFMCC congregations, the Rev. James Mitulski, pastor of MCC San Francisco, recalled one of Rev. Russell-Coons' gifts was telling the truth even when the truth was an uncomfortable one. Mitulski reminded UFMCC members how Ron had criticized the denomination for not providing health and disability insurance for its employees. Rev. Mitulski said Ron hoped through his criticism and outspokenness that the churches affiliated with UFMCC would someday provide the same benefits that secular organizations extend to their employees with disabilities.

Rev. Mitulski said one of the hardest decisions Ron faced in recent years was his retirement from MCC Seattle two years ago when his health prevented him from preforming his responsibilities appropriately. Ron's decision to retire was motivated by love for the Seattle congregation and its future and for the concern of his own care. Retirement was an acknowledgement of responsibility rather than a retreat from it. "I hope such decisions command our respect," Mitulski said.

Rev. Russell-Coons represented UFMCC at meetings of the National Council of Churches. His presence there as an openly gay Christian minister and as the only person with AIDS greatly influenced the NCC in its study of AIDS.

In 1989, Ron brought two busloads of official representatives from Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical churches to MCC San Francisco for one of the church's AIDS healing services. This was the first time most of them had worshipped with gay and lesbian Christians. Many were hostile or ambivalent at first, but by the end of the service most were in tears, telling the congregation: "You sing as if you've already gone to heaven." Rev. Mitulski remembered Ron preaching a strong sermon that night titled, "We Are the Body of Christ, and We Have AIDS."

Yale theologian Letty Russell has written a book about the church and AIDS which includes some of Ron's sermons. Also, MCC San Francisco will be publishing a collection of Ron's sermons this fall about his living with AIDS for two years.

GONE HOME TO GLORY! MEMORIAL FOR REV. EMMETT J. WATKINS, JR.

Born in Houston, Texas in March of 1943, but raised in San Francisco, California, Rev. Watkins spent two years serving his country during the Vietnam era in Anchorage, Alaska. Upon discharge he lived for a short time in Seattle, Washington and Los Angeles, California. He became a member of MCC Los Angeles ("Mother Church" for the UFMCC), and there he received his calling for a ministry to serve God. He left Los Angeles and attended the college of New Rochelle New York Theological Seminary, receiving a degree and working to fulfill the requirements to become a minister in the UFMCC.

During this time Emmett served as the interim pastor of Alpha and Omega MCC in Brooklyn, New York. He returned to Los Angeles to receive his license for the ministry. After two years of seeking and searching he was called to be the pastor of Morning Star MCC in Worcester, Massachusetts, where under his leadership the church has grown from eight members to over eighty members and friends and has recently been chartered by the Universal Fellowship.

His survivors include the Rev. and Mrs. E.J. Watkins, Sr., the Rev. and Mrs. E.H. Watkins, Mrs. Dinese Madison, Mrs. Patrisse Dawson, Mrs. Elisicia Wright and Mr. Eric V. Watkins, several nieces and nephews and a host of family. He also leaves a multitude of church family, both within Worcester and throughout the world.

"THE LAST BOOGIEMAN"

By Rev. Larry J. Uhrig

(Reprinted from Rev. Uhrig's regular column in The Washington Blade, October 5, 1990)

I thought a long time about how honest I could be with my readers. It is hard to be intimate and self disclosing in print. But when I begin to write I am suddenly sitting face to face with you, telling you the secrets of my heart. I have learned that keeping secrets is a deadly game. It often makes us sick. Someone once told me that we were as sick as our secrets. So let me tell you these private thoughts addressed to you in public.

When the doctor told me that my HIV test was positive it felt like an ax had been laid to my root. I have seen a tree quiver when struck with an ax. It trembles from its base to the ends of each fragile leaf. It felt like that. I felt a flood of emotion begin to swamp me from all sides when the decision to go on AZT was made. In the days which followed I began to process this new truth. I began to face my life and each moment from a new perspective. I began to learn important lessons. These simple lessons are about life. They are true whether you test positive for HIV or not. They are for all of us.

LESSON 1: All my life I have had adversaries. Someone or something told me that, "I couldn't," "I wouldn't" or "I shouldn't." The adversary always tried to stop me, frighten me, cause me to quit or turn back from my chosen course. The United Methodist Church told me I could not minister. I chose not to agree with them. Before that many told me I could not be gay and Christian. I chose the truth over that lie. I realized that I had always had adversaries and that they always used fear to threaten me. The fact was this, the HIV virus was just another adversary. It tried to scare me to death. I had to treat it like any other adversary.

LESSON 2: Treat the HIV adversary like all the rest. Stand against it and say "NO. You can't scare me into quitting." I had already learned to stand in my faith against my adversary. Each time I pushed back fear and went on doing what I was called to do. The lesson is this, THE RULES DON'T CHANGE. Every adversary is defeated the same way. What worked before will work now. I could not give power to this microscopic invader. I would not let the meaning and purpose of my life be thwarted. I knew what to do. I could and would choose life. I would not yield to fear. This brings me to lesson three.

LESSON 3: Facing the threat of death means facing the last threat. There are no more after this one. It was a humorous moment of awareness, I had seen the last boogieman and it didn't scare me. I actually laughed out loud. I remembered St. Paul, "I have run the race, finished the course, fought the good fight." I could see the last great threat, Death, and it had no power over me. My life would continue as it had always been, an expression of God's presence, gift, and grace. My faith was about resurrection and about life, not death. It all became very real to me. The presence of this virus would only propel me into deeper devotion to my ministry, my work, and my passionate love for our people. I regret nothing about my life. It is a blessing.

Besides these lessons about living I want to give you some direct advise. FIRST: Get tested. So many things can be done for you that could not be done just a few years ago. Not to get tested is to risk finding out you are HIV positive when you get an opportunistic infection. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose by getting tested. SECOND: Don't keep secrets. In the end they will hurt you. Find a group of loving and honest people who you can be real with. Let them nurture and strengthen you. When you have down days they will lift you up. If you don't have a group call me, I'll give you one. THIRD: Faith and spiritual development are the most important components of your health and well being. They are more significant than any drug. Without faith your drugs are in vain. LASTLY: this, too, shall pass. The era of AIDS will end. Let it not dominate our vision of all we are and all we can be. We will face it and continue on. The Last Boogieman, Death, was defeated long ago. We should not be afraid, anymore.

MY SON SAVED ME!

(The following is a letter from a Mother of a son who died of Aids. Portions of the original letter, which were of a personal nature to Rev. Karen Ducham have been excluded. Permission has been obtained from the originator to copy or reproduce the following. Rev. Ducham is the pastor of MCC Tampa).

Dear Rev. Ducham,

Two years ago any letter you received from me would have been one of hatred and condemnation.

My son was "properly" put out of our house when he told us he was gay. Our pastor advised us in the methods of "tough love", cutting off our love to Bob until he changed his ways and stopped his sinful behavior.

(Continued next page)

We did not see our son for three years, when we were informed that he was in the hospital dying from aids.

Bob did not die and my pastor told me that God was giving me a second chance to save my son's soul from the fires of hell. I was to go to him, stay with him and save his soul by bringing him to Christ.

I went with Bible in hand and a missionary determination.

I moved in with my son and stayed with my son for the next eight months, determined to be with him wherever he went that I might change his ways and guide him toward the right path before he died.

I was with him when he picked up food. I found I had brought my Bible with me, but nothing for the pantry.

I was with him for his blood transfusions. I found I had brought my Bible but Bob's friend read to him a story he liked since Bob's eyes couldn't see the small print.

I was with him when he went through a period of chills. I had brought my Bible but the next-door neighbor brought him an afgan to wrap around him.

I was with him when one of his friends wasn't doing well and having trouble keeping food in his system. I offered to read to his friend from my Bible but Bob instead cooked him a special dinner that he ate and was able to keep in his system long enough to get nourishment.

I was with him when he went to get medical help. We had with "tough love" taken our son off our insurance policy. I sat in the hospital waiting room with my Bible in my hands watching all the "foster parents" struggle to help another abandoned child.

I was with him when he went to church. I took my Bible of course and prayed that words would be uttered which would get my son back on the right path. Instead my son was hugged and kissed and loved.

I FINALLY REALIZED THAT MY HANDS HAD BEEN SO BUSY HOLDING ON TO MY BIBLE THAT I HAD NOT....IN THE SIX MONTHS THAT I HAD BEEN LIVING WITH MY SON....EVER ONCE TOUCHED HIM.

I hugged my son that day for the first time in 3 1/2 years. The God my son knew so well, was not the God I had heard so much about or the God I was striving so hard to introduce Bob to.

I came that day, many months ago, to save my son; and praise God and your community!....MY SON SAVED ME!

I pray that you will not have to deal with many more parents such as the one I used to be, and if I meet any I now have alot of positive things to share with them.

GOD LOVE YOU ALL! Margaret

REVIEW: TO CELEBRATE AND TO MOURN: Liturgical Resources for Worshiping Communities Living with Aids

By Rev. Louis F. Kavar
Gaithersburg, MD: Chi Rho Press, 1989

(Review by: Rev. Stephen Pieters)

Rev. Lou Kavar has provided an excellent and much-needed resource for UFMCC (or any Christian church) in this new collection from Chi Rho Press. Kavar's tenure as Director of the Mid-Atlantic District's Lazarus Ministries has provided him with the kind of Aids ministry experience which makes these liturgies ring with depth and truth.

Kavar provides a chapter on "Liturgical Symbols" that have gained new meaning in the decade of HIV. Further chapters provide resources for services of hope, of healing, for those living in fear, for a grieving community, for a communal memorial service, a World Aids Day Service, as well as prayers for lighting the Aids Candle, and for Care-givers and researchers.

The author is careful to follow the UFMCC guidelines on inclusive language, and also reflects the diversity of styles among MCC's.

This helpful book belongs in every church, and on every pastor's bookshelf. Kavar states that his prayer is "that these resources are a vehicle for your congregation through which you experience the loving care of our God as we continue to live with the reality of Aids." I am sure many people will be touched by Rev. Kavar's collection of resources, which do indeed convey God's loving care.

See the enclosed flyer on how to order your copy of this inspiring new book.

(Enclosed for your convenience is an offering envelope for the UFMCC AIDS Ministry. Thank you for your support!)